Culture and Society

CULTURE AGAINST SOCIETY

F. Allan Hanson

Culture has turned sour. Originally a constructive force, it has now become disruptive to contemporary society. Such a claim may sound heretical, because in social scientific circles culture is generally considered to be a unique and crowning characteristic of humanity. While it is claimed that certain animal species have culture at some rudimentary level, none comes anywhere near to the linguistic and symbolic complexity of human culture. Culture enables us to realize our social and mental potentials. Indeed. because stone tools and other traces of culture predate the emergence of Homo sapiens, it has been argued that the immediately pre-human stages of our biological evolution occurred in the context of, and in adaptation to. culture. Culture, that is to say, made us human.

But now the constructive role of culture in the human career has run its course. Indeed, far from boosting further development, culture has become an obstacle to the evolution of human society. My goal is to establish that proposition, and to suggest a reason why. We may begin by noticing that one common manifestation of culture in contemporary society goes by the decidedly unconstructive term "culture wars."

Culture Wars

Much anxiety is expressed over the polarization of contemporary society, and for good reason. The American political arena is now more viscerally split than at any time since the Vietnam War. The right-wing drive to impeach former President Clinton over the Monica Lewinsky affair was mean-spirited in the extreme, and the left wing regards President Bush with undisguised animosity for, as they say, stealing the 2000 election, invading Iraq for trumped-up reasons, plunging that country into chaos under the American occupation, and eroding civil liberties at home as part of the "war on terror." On the floor of the U.S. Senate. the Vice-President of the United States tells a senator of the other party to "go luck yourself," and afterwards says he feels better for having said it.

Politics is .just one of many battlegrounds for the culture wars that split contemporary society. James Davison Hunter's eponymous book on the subject stresses differences between agnostics and left-leaning progressive Christians on the one hand, and the religious right, consisting of conservative Catholics and fundamentalist Protestants on the other. These constituencies squabble over whether the Pledge of Allegiance should include the phrase "under God." Crèches in town squares at Christmas stir up controversy, and in 2003 the Chief Justice of Alabama was suspended from office for refusing to remove a monument displaying the Ten Commandments from the rotunda of the state judicial center. Other important battlefields are the family, sexuality, and life style, where conflict rages over abortion, gay and lesbian rights, feminism, and the patriarchal family. At the moment, the hot-button issue is same-sex marriage and whether there should be state and national constitutional amendments banning it. In public education the battle is joined over prayer in the schools, sex education, and the teaching of evolution.

On the international scene, Muslim, Christian, and Jewish fundamentalists are convinced that they alone possess God's truth, and they consider themselves called to defend that truth against other way of thinking. Many of them embrace violence as a way to thwart their adversaries, whom they regard with pure hatred. The United States is known in many places as the "great Satan," and members of the Bush administration routinely brand America's adversaries as "'evil." Recent events in the Balkans, Rwanda, and Sudan prove that the unbelievable brutality of ethnic cleansing and genocide still haunts the world.

In spite of all that, the widespread conviction that culture wars are heating up on every front may not be accurate. Studies over the short term of a few decades indicate a nuanced picture, where divisiveness may be on the rise over some issues, but remaining the same, or even declining, over others. In the Ringer view, diverse culture wars have split American society from the founding of the republic. European history in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is replete with religious conflicts. Disputes between science and religion have raged since the seventeenth century. The term itself, *Kulturkampf,* was first applied to the antagonism between Protestants and Catholics in Bismarck's Germany more than a century ago. In forms ranging from scholarly debate to all-out war, ideological conflicts between monarchy and democracy dominated political life in the West from the seventeenth century onward, and battles between fascism, communism, and capitalism defined the twentieth century on a global scale.

Culture wars erupt, then, not just here and now, but in many times and places. It appears that they are a systemic component of ideological diversity, whenever and wherever that occurs. This view is consistent with Hunter, who defines "cultural conflict very simply as political and social hostility rooted in different systems of moral understanding...[that] always have a character of ultimacy to them. They are basic commitments and beliefs that provide a source of identity, purpose, and togetherness for the people who live by them."

Three obvious generalizations about culture wars should be highlighted. First, they are *cultural* because they are grounded in ideologies and values, what Hunter calls "systems of moral understanding." Second, they are *wars* because of the ultimate nature of these moral or cultural systems. When the principles defining people's "identity, purpose, and togetherness" are on the line, they are not about to dilute them in order to get along with other people who espouse opposing principles. Third, no one (except those who welcome imminent Armageddon and the end of the world) thinks culture wars are a good thing. They are clearly detrimental to the overall harmony of society, and it would be better for people individually and for society in general if there were less polarizing conflict. It does not follow from this that everything cultural is bad, but it does follow that in many respects culture has come to exercise a divisive, detrimental influence in contemporary society. The next question is, why?

Social and Cultural Evolution Diverge

Culture and society are different things, and their separate courses of evolution are becoming incompatible. A society is an organized plurality of interacting individuals, while culture refers to the languages, beliefs, meanings, symbols, mores, and customs that are shared by members of human groups. Society and culture worked well together in the conditions of pre-human and early-human social life. Then small, more or less nomadic, groups gained their livelihood from

wild plants and animals, and engaged in friendly or hostile interactions with other such groups. Ethnographic accounts of hunting-and-gathering peoples from Australia, Africa, and the Americas describe the marvelous variety of their social and political organizations; religious and magical beliefs, knowledge of plants, animals, and the natural world, ideas about illness and healing; and folklore and mythology.

Although human beings have never been robotic slaves to custom, incapable of independent thought, culture does stress common beliefs and conventions. These enabled people of simple societies to communicate with each other by means of language and other systems of symbols, and to coordinate their economic, social, political, ideological, and recreational activities so as to conduct the necessary tasks of daily life, maximize their chances for survival, and share a set of understandings and values that give life meaning, purpose, and beauty. In small, relatively simple societies, culture is the basis of social solidarity, the glue that holds society together. People identify themselves as Arunta, or Cheyenne, or Mbuti, because a common culture--language, beliefs, values, and customs—ties them to each other, and simultaneously distinguishes them from other groups with other cultures. In his classic *The Division of Labor in Society,* Emile Durkheim called this form of social cohesion "mechanical solidarity."

Culture works best as the source of mechanical solidarity when it is inward-looking and closed. By this I mean that its primary function is to order the relations among people within the group, and that it accomplishes this with categories that are clear, unequivocal, and unquestioned. Different categories from other cultures are not allowed to interfere. Dissent, or even lukewarm acquiescence, weakens the consensus. This arrangement works best when the scale is small. It is easiest to maintain consensus of beliefs and expectations when they are held by restricted numbers of people who are in regular contact with each other and who don't have much to do with outsiders. But small, relatively self sufficient and isolated societies are now rare. The course of societal evolution has been in the direction of large, complex societies, with tens or hundreds of millions of members that encompass diverse subcultures. Today, societies such as these contain the vast majority of the world's population.

The catalyst for the growth of societies was the Neolithic, or Agricultural Revolution, which refers to the time about 10,000 years ago, when the domestication of plants dramatically increased the capacity to produce food. People abandoned nomadic wandering for sedentary residence, population grew and towns and cities came into being. Something less than the entire workforce of a society was now able to produce adequate food for everyone. This released some members of society from subsistence tasks to specialize as craftsmen, traders, soldiers, priests, and administrators. Thus the division of labor, largely limited to gender and age under hunting-and-gathering technology, became much more elaborate.

Several nineteenth-century scholars noted that the basis of social solidarity changed as societies became larger and more diverse. Instead of the cultural similarity that constitutes mechanical solidarity, societies with a complex division of labor are held together by their internal *differences:* the cobbler depends on the baker for bread, who depends on the carpenter for shelter, who depends on the blacksmith for tools, who depends on the cobbler lk)r shoes. With this kind of economic interdependence, it didn't matter so much that people thought and believed the same things, or that they looked at the world in a distinctive way. Therefore, common culture

became less important, and individual variability increased. On the analogy with the different, interdependent physiological functions of the organs of the body, Durkheim named this kind of social cohesiveness "organic solidarity."

As society becomes large and internally complex, culture evolves as well. Large societies bring a number of different subcultures into close proximity, defined along any of a variety of lines, such as ethnicity, class, wealth, religion, gender, sexual preference, and so on. In these circumstances, culture becomes more outward-looking. At least as much as regulating relations among its adherents, it becomes a mark of identity, as people from different constituencies define themselves in terms of the distinctive cultural characteristics that set them apart, one from the other.

As it turns outward, culture may open or it may remain closed. Durkheim believed that the former course is normal. He expected cultural imperatives to weaken and become more generalized, liberalizing law, diminishing brutal punishment, forcing religious dogma into retreat, and liberating the individual. In 1893, when *The Division of Labor* was originally published, Durkheim was clearly a believer in progress. Together with most of his contemporaries, he was convinced that society and culture evolve together to a higher state of individual freedom, equality, and justice. Moreover, his use of perfectly interdependent organs as a physiological metaphor doubtless colored his view of society as a well-tuned system of smoothly interlocking parts.

Today we think differently. We do not think any more of society as being or becoming perfectly integrated (as, indeed, our increasing understanding of the immune system and disorders such as HIV make biological organisms themselves appear less flawlessly organized). Nor are we sanguine about the idea of progress. As society evolves toward greater complexity, differences of wealth, class, and power increase rather than decrease, fueling struggles between groups bent on maintaining or overthrowing various forms of hegemony and discrimination. Narrow-mindedness nurtures intolerance or indifference toward other interests, values, and understandings. As a result, hostile attitudes and behavior fly between societies in regular contact, as well as between culturally different constituencies within the same society.

My argument, then, is that when it remains closed, culture itself becomes a divisive factor in the contemporary conditions of globalization and large, internally diverse societies. It is enlisted as a political weapon in battles between groups with different agendas and different views of the world. It is deployed as compulsive adherence to one set of ideas and values, while condemning all alternatives as dangerous or evil, or, less stridently but no less insidiously, by people cocooning themselves complacently in the received views of their own culture and avoiding the challenge or threat that comes with taking other views seriously.

Examples are everywhere. Specialized constituencies develop their own interests and points of view. Bureaucrats have different needs, and see things differently than the intelligentsia, who differ in these ways from farmers, who differ again from industrial workers. They develop different cultures. Moreover, empires and nation-states formed societies encompassing several different ethnic and cultural groups. They, too, see things differently. If the differences engender more or less open conflict, i term them contradictory. If they are perceived as irrelevant to each

other, coexisting in isolation and indifference, they are compartmental. In either case, it is clear that if culture was well adapted to the small, homogeneous communities that characterized the early conditions of human life, it has often become maladapted to the heterogeneous societies in which most human beings live today.

Coping with Cultural Diversity

In placing so much emphasis on cultural difference within contemporary societies as maladapted, I seem to be bucking a current in contemporary thought that celebrates cultural diversity. Too oflen, however, that stream is shallow. When my family visited Disneyland some 30 years ago, we piled into small boats and were ferried through a series of artificial landscapes, ranging from Alpine pastures to Asian rice paddies to Central African villages. Animated dolls peopled each location, of a color and in costumes ethnically appropriate to it, all smiling and swaying and singing, "It's a small world, alter all." The experience was annoying, partly because I couldn't get the tune out of my head, and partly because it trivialized cultural differences.

Of course we enjoy the cultural variety of costume and cuisine, folklore, music, and dance in restaurants and concert halls, and at innumerable street fairs and community festivals. But culture more fundamentally concerns what Hunter called ultimate systems of moral understanding: convictions about the texture of reality, the shape of the divine, the nature of truth, and the morality of behavior. In the environment of closed culture, when differences of these sorts butt up against each other, what they evoke ranges from shouting matches between talking heads on television to street demonstrations to terrorist attacks and war. As societies interact more frequently and become internally more diverse, such dangerous and divisive confrontations increase. What is needed is not more polka bands and street dances (although I certainly do not recommend less of them, because they are a lot of fun and probably do make some modest contribution toward solving the problem), but to cool down and open up cultural principles to the point where they lose their absolute, imperative trappings and can be weighed, considered, and appreciated by thoughtful individuals as representatives of a multitude of designs for human living.

Some complex societies in some situations do achieve internal harmony. This happens, however, only when culture opens to the point where people are not imprisoned by its tenets, but can regard them dispassionately and rationally consider alternatives. An evolved social situation is necessary for this to occur, because they can consider alternatives only when they know that there *are* alternatives, and that occurs primarily in the conditions of regular contact between different societies and within large, culturally heterogeneous societies. Still, individual judgment and toleration can flourish only when cultural differences are deemed to be complementary rather than contradictory or compartmental, with the potential to mesh effectively together. In that happy but all - too - rare event, culture and society do work together to bring about the full, organic solidarity that Durkheim so confidently (if naively) anticipated.

To summarize, the evolutionary paths of culture and society have diverged to the point where culture has become an obstacle to the productive communication and interaction that it originally enabled. For it again to become a positive aspect of social life, people must free themselves from being so exclusively and irrevocably saturated with their own cultural premises that they are existentially threatened by alternatives. This does not mean, as Durkheim pointed out, that

culture would disappear altogether. This is virtually unthinkable and would be disastrous, because then people would lack the languages and shared concepts that are necessary for communication and interaction. What it does mean is that culture must open to the point where people can gain critical understanding of and control over their cultural principles and concepts rather than being held to them. This is much deeper than a Disneyland celebration of cultural diversity; it requires recognition of common ground among the most basic of cultural premises, and juxtaposing cultural differences in a rational way that encourages the formation of new ideas and strategies. This can only occur when those differences are seen as complementary rather than contradictory or compartmental.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS

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